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SEMINAR REPORT

REPORT OF A SEMINAR ON BIAS IN
INTELLIGENCE ANALYSIS




CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF INTELLIGENCE

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

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REPORT OF A SEMINAR ON BIAS IN INTELLIGENCE ANALYSIS

Is Agency analysis biased? Does our product display a strong parochial point of view or reveal distinctly recognizable mindsets of certain types? If so, should we try to do anything about it?

These questions were explored in February 1977 by a group of 21 officers drawn primarily from the Intelligence Directorate of the Agency in an afternoon seminar sponsored by the OTR Center for the Study of Intelligence. The participants choose to define bias as the distortion of rational judgment in analysis for whatever reason. They focused on community biases (i.e., institutional distortions based on an Agency or departmental prejudice), unit biases (distortions stemming from prejudices widely-held within individual CIA units), and personal biases (the mindsets of individual analysts).

Some conclusions of the participants were that:

- Community or institutional biases, although dangerous if not recognized and dealt with, do on balance help to reinforce healthy analytical competition and spur the production of sound products if the components have adequate opportunity to present and defend their analytical positions.
- Unit-wide biases are in some cases different from the popular myths about them. Prejudices in favor of western democratic political ways, for example, have faded. The most serious bias prevalent in analytic

units is the tendency to accept the notion that tomorrow will most likely be much like yesterday--the conventional wisdom that traps us into failing to guard against the unexpected or the discontinuity.

--Personal biases are the most troublesome. They are frequently unique and hard to detect. There is probably no way to overcome them, except to strive consciously for as much objectivity as possible. The participants believed there is a more intense awareness today than in the past of the dangers of bias in the CIA, and a desire to avoid it. The willingness of a variety of analysts to engage in a frank and serious discussion of bias is one sign of the present spirit.

Institutional Biases

In discussing biases based on department-wide points of view, the seminar participants found helpful the experiences encountered annually in the preparation of National Estimate (11-3/8) on Soviet strategic forces. Work on this estimate brings to the surface the so-called military/civilian difference on the extent of the Soviet threat. One participant jestingly characterized the situation by describing the Air Force as at the extreme right ("the Russians are not only coming, they are already here"); DIA and the rest of the armed services as just slightly less to the right ("the Russians are coming and are half-way here"); CIA somewhere in the center area ("the Russians are coming but we don't know when"); and the Department of State at the liberal or left end of the spectrum ("the Russians are not only not coming, they may not even care").

This led one of the group to note that a review of strategic weapons assessments over the years would show that the intelligence community had at first overestimated the Soviet threat--there was a distinct U.S. missile gap (and this had become Presidential election politics); there was then an overreaction and the community for years underestimated the threat. In the most recent round, we had returned to something in between. The history of the strategic weapons assessments may provide us with an example of the dangers of overreacting to an intelligence error once the error is clear.

Some participants asserted that institutional biases usually are well-known to consumers and that the latter can by and large allow for these biases and discount them when they are reflected in a specific intelligence product. Participants cited examples of Secretaries of Defense and State calling for a variety of departmental estimates on the same problem to get a full view of the substantive question at issue. As to whether any attempt should be made specifically to identify standard institutional biases in finished intelligence, there was no solid consensus on the part of the participants. They recognized that this would be very hard to do with utility and fairness. One participant contended that the Office of Strategic Research (OSR) was created in part to counter a recognized (or perceived) institutional bias in military intelligence products.

Another participant said that the existence of established departmental positions or policy lines often creates a continuing pressure on CIA analysts leading to a distortion in CIA products. For example, analytical drafts from OSR on military hardware subjects are often sprinkled with "only's" in a defensive counter to the more hawkish military services--"the Soviets have only X number of type Y weapon operational." Some Agency analysts may also develop a sort of defensiveness borne of intimidation by executive/policy level senior analysts outside the Agency (such as on the NSC Staff) who have strong analytical experience themselves as well as additional information and insights gained from working in the policy milieu.

CIA analysts were accused by a Senator recently of holding an institutional anti-Israeli bias in their analysis of mid-eastern affairs. This allegation reinforced efforts underway since the 1973 Arab/Israeli war to question the mindsets underlying CIA's mid-eastern analysis. An attempt is being made to quantify every element of input to the analysis, especially the factors that allegedly tended to cause the analysts to overlook the willingness of the Arabs to resort to war in 1973 despite intrinsic military weakness. The process itself is helping to get all the biases out on the table for clear examination, even though it has failed to prove contention of consistent bias.

The description of the mid-east exercise led the seminar participants to question whether the Agency should attempt to

purge itself of all biases. There was some sentiment that the institutional biases among the various components of the intelligence community tended to work for rather than against the sounder community products such as 11-8/3, especially in those instances where each component had its say and each was forced to defend its analysis against vigorous contention.

Serious CIA Biases

Some biases within CIA's analytical units were viewed by the participants as particularly troublesome. The first of these was the "middle-of-the-road" bias which leads the analyst to observe that, "usually tomorrow will be just about like yesterday," and to conclude that if he reflects this point of view consistently he will be right about 90 percent of the time. Such approaches avoid "rocking the boat" and often deter challenge from others. But they also discourage rigorous examination of possibilities for incongruous, unique behavior that should be examined seriously in many important situations,

Illustrations of middle-of-the-road mindsets mentioned were the Soviet development of chemical and bacterial weaponry (CBW), and the disbelief which greeted the early signs of the Sino-Soviet dispute. The U.S. views CBW as so abhorrent that analysts pay it little attention, whereas the Soviet Union does not view CBW with nearly the same abhorrence. Thus analysts may not be sufficiently alert to and concerned about unique Soviet developments in this area. In the second

illustration, the intelligence community, thinking in terms only of precedent, took more time than it should have to conclude that the inconceivable had happened and that there was a split between the two communist powers.

Some of the participants believed the present career reward system in the community favors this "middle-of-the-road" bias. The analyst with a steady, even if unspectacular record, will usually get ahead faster on the career track than the officer willing to take radical positions, which are only rarely correct. In the military there is an even clearer reward system for playing it safe by painting the threat in dark colors. To counter the "middle-of-the-road" bias, management must avoid discouraging radical thoughts and approaches to analysis, and reward some of the iconoclasts.

There are two myths prevalent in the Agency that influence its approach to bias in analysis. One is that the Operations Directorate is not involved in the policy process, and the other is that the Intelligence Directorate always approaches every problem of analysis from perfect objectivity. The participants in the seminar agreed that neither was true.

In connection with the first of these myths, the question arose whether operational involvement by CIA in some foreign development tended to exert pressures on analysts working that area (i.e., to shape analysis so that it supported the Agency's operational line). There was general agreement that in Vietnam this did happen and that Angola, the most recent

case, did not really provide a fair test of the matter. Nevertheless, because it has happened in the past, the group agreed it can happen again. Some characterized the problem as establishing an "organizational straight jacket" on the analysis of certain issues in which the United States or the Agency had a vested and clear policy interest. Other analysts claimed not to feel any such (organizational) "straight jacket." The view was offered that the presence or absence of such pressures was in part a function of whether or not the analysts were in concert with or in conflict with those in the Operations Directorate on the subject at hand. In the case of Vietnam there was alleged to be conflict in the views of the two, whereas in Angola there was alleged to be concert in the views.

If there is a conflict in view between the analysts and operators, the problem should not be handled by separating the analysis from the operational side of the Agency. A much better way, according to some officers is to increase communication between the two sides when an operationally-loaded event arises. This helps prevent parochialism on both sides, and avoids the tendency of each side to let its biases affect its views and comments on the situation.

With regard to the second myth--that the DDI is always objective in its analysis--several participants asserted that it was impossible to produce finished intelligence that did not display some bias. The outside influences of home, family, religion, ethnic group, and education are at work on

any individual and cannot help but exert themselves to a greater or lesser degree upon the individual analyst. This can even be a healthy thing if different backgrounds are represented by different analysts working on the same problem--a combination which is bound to bring out competitive contention of different approaches to the problem. It can be a problem, however, if the analysts in the group are all "birds of a feather flocking together," thus reinforcing their biases and blinding themselves to other perspectives.

Some of the participants seemed to see within CIA itself groupings of similar outlooks; they characterized the Directorate of Operations as the conservative element, and the Directorate of Intelligence as the liberal element.

Agency Biases: Lesser Ones

Some biases mentioned in the issues paper for the seminar (attached) were deemed by the participants not to have a major significance in the Agency's analytical effort today. One was the common pre-1960's college Political Science department "thesis" that "Western Democracy" and "Our Political Ways" are the best thing for all the world's nations, and that those nations coming closest to it are the "best" and those straying farthest from it are the "worst." This could almost be termed the "Evangelical" bias. The participants believed that this point of view is declining and is not really operative for those educated at the college level after the early 1960's.

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF INTELLIGENCE

27 January 1977

Issues Paper: Bias in CIA Intelligence Analysis

Is Agency analysis biased? Does our product display a strong parochial point of view in its analysis or reveal distinctly recognizable mindsets of certain types? The Agency has from time to time been accused of bias in its intelligence analysis. We propose in a seminar format to explore the question seeking to identify what biases exist, and the importance of them to the work of the analyst. We would hope also to get a sense of the biases that most influence the production of the DDI, whether or not they are desirable, and what should be done about them if they are not. We might also consider whether it is important to identify our biases for the consumer of our intelligence, and if so, what is the most effective way to do this? In the discussion that follows, some thoughts about biases are set forth to stimulate thought on the subject. They are by no means a complete listing and possibly not the most important. They are designed as a discussion starting point. Participants in the discussion may well have some other views.

Discussion

There are many ways to categorize biases. We have chosen to separate them in terms of certain analytical biases or influences that crop up in our production, and the outside and institutional biases which affect Agency analysts as a group.

Analytical biases can be divided into several categories. The most common might be called the "approach" biases or mind-sets. Two of them are the tendencies to approach the subject with the Candide or Cassandra syndrome--i.e., presenting the material in terms of either the worst case or best case. Both tend to blind the analyst to realities, most frequently by causing him to underrate a more likely middle-of-the-road possibility. Do we predict the worst because it is less harshly criticized if wrong than erring on the side of an outcome more desirable to our policy interests?

Two other approach biases are the ascribing of our own motivations to the leaders of the country being analyzed, and seeing in what that country is doing what we want to see it doing. If we "mirror-image" someone else's intentions, actions, or reactions, by attributing to them the same kind of logic, cultural values, and thought process that would characterize us, we will frequently fail to arrive at the things that motivate them. If we personalize a nation, or fail to allow for the personality traits of a leader or group of them, we can get badly off track. Equally, some

tend routinely to approach analysis seeing what they want to see or believe, discounting too much the data or interpretations which run counter to those expectations. Both will more often lead us to the wrong than the right analysis.

The last, and perhaps the most serious, of the "approach" category of analysis bias is the conscious or unconscious determination to make or shape U.S. policy by the presentation. Any good journalist knows how to put the words together to lead the reader toward the conclusion that the writer wants, and many of these are subtle enough that they pass through the strainer of review by senior officers before publication. The avoidance of this pitfall is most difficult in analysis of the probable reaction to a given possible course--for a predicted favorable reaction invites the course of action and a predicted unfavorable reaction discourages the course of action.

A second category of analysis bias is the cultural bias that develops as the analyst delves deeper and deeper into the culture of the region or country (or the industry or weapons system or whatever) that he is analyzing to the point that he becomes enamoured of the culture, (industry, weapons system) and thus loses objectivity. The converse is equally possible, the analyst becomes embittered and an implacable foe of the culture, (industry, weapons system). It is recognized generally that deep association with a specific culture almost never results in retention of total

objectivity toward that culture, and living in it will even more rapidly undermine objectivity while it increases the pace of learning about the culture. Friendships or animosities built up while living in a culture strongly tend to undercut objectivity. Carried a step further, there are world regional biases that can unconsciously be built up, and result in such impressions as: Africans and Arabs are stupid, slovenly, and unambitious; Italians and Latins are emotional and undependable; all Asians are inscrutable; the teutonic races are pragmatic and efficiency oriented; and so forth.

Biases regarding types of information constitute a third category of analysis bias. These can range over all categories of information handled by the analyst, such as never believing in anything in the press/public media, or its converse, believing that everything in the public media of some countries does reflect an accurate picture of the situation in that country. There are some who reject outright, or invest too great a credence in, clandestine service reports, and those who will not be convinced until they see a picture of it. State Department cables from abroad reflecting what foreign officials want to say to the U.S. Government sometimes are cited to outweigh reports from other overt and covert sources indicating the contrary. And there are differing interpretations of the degree of credence to be placed in intercepted messages of various types.

There may be a fourth category of analysis bias which could be dubbed the "compensation" bias in which an analyst or his supervisor, being oversensitive to probable biases in analysis, leans over backwards to compensate for the existence of a known bias or a previous miscall. A basic question here is whether biases should be identified for the consumer, and if so, how.

Outside biases are also at work on analysts in CIA to a greater or lesser degree. The analyst is a product of his background and his education, and he brings large doses of the latter to bear upon his initial work as an analyst in CIA. A great many of our officers have been brought in from eastern U.S. schools and reflect an education in the climate of eastern establishment liberalism, whether adopted or rejected as a personal set of values. To a degree in fact all of our analysts reflect an education to a sort of liberal democratic bias that pervades most of the institutions of higher learning across the nation. A few, educated abroad, would bring in the biases of the academic world in which they were trained.

From the analysts' education, background, and experiences before arriving at CIA, we are likely to detect the foundations of his domestic political orientation and his values in terms of foreign policy for the United States. These orientations are sometimes reflected in analysis in such ways of measuring the distance a given country is from U.S. ways of doing things, and evaluating it in that light, or

approving and disapproving a given country in terms of the degree to which its leaders espouse anti-communism, friendship toward the U.S., or some other characteristic. There are those who believe all military dictatorships are bad on the face of it, and therefore to be despised. The mind is thus set to see in any challenge to such a regime significance beyond the level it really merits. This leads to terms such as "repressive" which if carried far enough place us on the side of the terrorists and guerrillas. Equally as hazardous a mindset is that all corruption is intrinsically rotten, is therefore perceived by the ruled as evil, and therefore automatically leads to its own destruction from corruption alone. Few are willing to evaluate corruption in relative terms anywhere. America has a history of "championing the underdog," and we can easily let such sentiments carry us away in sympathy for some underdeveloped and underprivileged nation downtrodden by the adversities of fate.

There are also the institutional biases to which we are all subjected, the first and foremost being the "anti-bias bias"--believing that we are really the only people who can look objectively upon the issue at hand and come up with a soundly reasoned statement assessing the situation dispassionately. We place high premiums upon objectivity and grant perhaps too much lip service to the degree of it which we attain.

A second institutional bias, almost as serious a one, is the U.S. "policy" and Agency administration "line" on the questions being analyzed. There is operable here a sort of "reinforcing consensus" of those who have shaped the policy. Thus to present evidence against the trend established heretofore is bucking "conventional wisdom" instead of "joining the bandwagon." This problem arises in its most accute form when the Agency is asked for analysis of a situation which the requestor clearly intends to use to prove a point and defend or sell a specific policy which may not be the right one in view of the objective facts of the matter. Other aspects of institutional bias are the tendencies of the military to rank highly the threat from potential enemy countries, and the tendencies, only somewhat less pronounced, of the Department of State to rank the threat from abroad somewhat lesser than the Agency would. These biases tend to reinforce themselves within those units.

There is great value to be placed upon recognizing one's own biases of all kinds, but especially those which come to the analyst from outside the working environment of CIA. Are conscious efforts at recognition of biases being made? Should they be made? If so, in what way can they be made for the purposes of enhancing the objectivity of intelligence analysis?

Some biases may be extremely beneficial in the long run. The interplay of argument between "institutions" over

analysis may be a healthy check upon any of the agencies involved in intelligence analysis. Indeed, within the institution of CIA there are some parochial biases that sometimes are reflected in field reporting from those on the scene subject to the cultural bias noted earlier. Those steeped in years of active anti-communism may continue to be influenced by that in their approaches to their work today.

A second bias mentioned in the issues paper, but considered of lesser significance today is the tendency to apply our own ideas and motivations to others and conclude that if we were faced with the problems they are, we would do so and so; therefore, they, being rational, will do the same thing. Americans are viewed by some academicians as rationally positive people who hold that rationality applied to any problem will have a tendency properly to solve that problem. Most of the analysts present believed that this type of "mirror imaging" bias did not affect their approach to analysis and that to allow it to do so would be the mark of an immature analyst.

Personal Biases

Personal biases are troublesome because they may not be clearly evident to the peer and supervising personnel around a given analyst. Indeed the participants were of the general consensus that any bias which is generally recognizable is less bothersome because of the very fact that it can be isolated, articulated and dealt with consciously. But personal biases are frequently unique and hard to detect. For example, there can be a hidden and perhaps even unconscious desire to bring about a change in policy for any number of reasons either recognized or unrecognized by the analyst himself. One of the personal types of bias most frequently affecting our analysis, in the opinion of several of the officers present, is the "eastern establishment" bias with which many CIA analysts come to work. Those holding it are often characterized

as excessively liberal, humanistic, anti-force, pro-diplomacy, etc. in their point of view.

Recognizing and Correcting Biases

A frequent theme that ran through the discussion was the question of what we should do about our biases, once we have admitted that our intelligence product is affected by them and we have identified some of the more and less troublesome ones. One approach is the self-recognition of biases in minute detail.

One specialist on this particular aspect of the problem, a psychologist, outlined a process for self-recognition and correction of biases in analysis. The analyst must first see his error; usually this will be through a process of feedback from some element of the consumer populace or from observation of developments in the area being analyzed. Then he must analyze and set forth just how he arrived at the judgment. Finally, the analyst will have to recognize the precepts that led him wrong because they were based upon personal or unreasoned judgment of the evidence. Once this process is followed, there will be a variance in the degree of difficulty any analyst will have in eliminating or overcoming the biases, depending upon whether the biases were learned by education (the easier ones to change) or by experience (the more difficult to change).

There was no debate over the necessity of clearing and correcting the record where a biased analysis has been perpetrated and then recognized. All agreed that such correction

is essential. But the problem of correcting the record is no easy matter. It is hard to admit an error in print, and harder still to avoid overreacting (overcorrecting) in subsequent analytical treatments of the subject.

Some Concluding Thoughts

Although many intelligence errors were aired, not all of which have been mentioned in this report, the participants clearly recognized that biased analysis was not universally the cause of all these errors, nor was it necessarily more than a contributing cause in some of them. Other factors such as lack of information, or the prevalence of wrong information could equally as easily contribute to an intelligence miscall as could biased analysis.

The general willingness of a wide variety of analysts to participate in a seminar held on this topic and the serious interest in the frank listing of some of the more commonly noted biases circulated in the issues paper for the seminar, seems to demonstrate that the Agency's analysts, if not always approaching every analytical problem with absolute objectivity, are nevertheless attempting to preserve an ethos of objectivity and are seriously concerned with conquering tendencies toward bias in intelligence analysis. The participants reached the consensus that there was a very healthy new awareness of the dangers of biased analysis, the nature of many biases, and some of the avenues to avoid such biases.

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